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ABSTRACT

This paper is a report of the proceedings and a synthesis of discussion from a conference on the state of basic skills in American education held in Racine, Wisconsin, in April 1977. The participants were national education leaders, including specialists in different curriculum areas, legislators, public school administrators, and leaders from state and national education organizations. The group was charged with analyzing requirements for the development of competence in language skills, computing, and other basics. It was asked to sort out the issues in the back-to-basics movement, which calls on educators to give greater emphasis to basic skills. The conference participants discussed the fundamentals of student development, such as fostering creativity, social and civic responsibility, economic capability, and humaneness, as well as traditional academic skills. This report concludes with a discussion of evolving policy on the basics in education. (Author)

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Defining the Basics of American Education

Ben Brodinsky

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BEN BRODINSKY

After earning his M.A. in education at the University of Pennsylvania (1933), Ben Brodinsky hitchhiked to Washington, D.C., and obtained a job at the U.S. Office of Education writing news releases at $1 a year. After several months on the job, his salary was reduced by 15%, when President Hoover cut all federal salaries. When the New Deal came, Brodinsky received a substantial raise. He has been an active Democrat ever since.

The major part of his professional career was spent as editor-in-chief of Croft Educational Services at New London, Connecticut. From 1945 to 1970 Brodinsky directed the publication of some 32 publications a month.

At present he uses his 200-year-old home in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, as his base for consulting and writing services. Among his clients are the Educational Press Association of America, the National School Boards Association, New England School Development Council, and the American Institutes for Research in Palo Alto.

In March, 1977, the *Phi Delta Kappan* published his article, "Back to the Basics: The Movement and Its Meaning." It has since become one of the most widely quoted sources on the topic.

Among Brodinsky's gross annual product are such diversified items as half a dozen speeches before major organizations, newsletters on educational communication, several bushels of Big Boy tomatoes, and about five poems. He is president of the Connecticut State Poetry Society.

Defining the Basics in American Education

By Ben Brodinsky

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Foreword

On April 25, 1977, a group of national education leaders met for three days at Wingspread in Racine, Wisconsin, to examine the state of the basic skills in American education. The meeting was sponsored by /I/D/E/A/ (the Institute for Development of Educational Activities, Inc., an affiliate of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation), the Thomas Alva Edison Foundation, and Phi Delta Kappa. The Wingspread conference center was made available by The Johnson Foundation. It is a facility conducive to calm thinking and reasoned discussion.

Participants in the conference, some 40 in number, included specialists in reading, communications, mathematics, and other areas of the curriculum; legislators, public school administrators, and representatives from higher education; and leaders from state and national agencies concerned with education.

The group was charged with analyzing requirements for the development of competence in reading, writing, computing, and other basic skills. It was asked to sort out the issues in a movement that calls upon educators to give greater emphasis to what has been labeled "basic skills."

Several participants were asked to present position papers and prepared statements. These helped to begin the colloquy. But most of the time was spent in general sessions for the exchange of facts and ideas or in six small groups that concentrated on single topics.

Small-group leaders were John Egsgard, mathematics; Fletcher Watson, science; Jeanne Chall, reading; Edmund Farrell, communications; Stanley Elam, other basics; and Norman Dixon, assessment. Harold Davis served as moderator for the groups.*

*For the names of all participants, see Appendix A.

The three days were filled with presentations of detailed facts about student achievement; with questions and answers about trends in education and school practices; with suggestions, recommendations, and proposals that, in turn, are to be considered by the American people.

This report is not a verbatim record of proceedings. It is a synthesis of the separate discussions. It is also interpretive. As an interpretive reporter, I have used material from formal presentations and informal late-evening chats; from documents prepared for the conference; from tape recordings of the small- and large-group sessions; and from information obtained both before and after the conference.

—Ben Brodinsky, reporter
Old Saybrook, Connecticut
July, 1977

Basics—Changing, Spiraling, Fundamental

In the final minute of the Wingspread conference, the speaker who was to close it said: "My notion of the basics assumes that our schooling system should be concerned with literacy in words and numbers. It also acknowledges that our educational system will be moving toward another set of basics: truth, beauty, justice, love, and faith. Character-rooted passions are required for the survival of a democracy. We want children to be not only competent but also compassionate; in Dag Hammarskjold's words, 'to become truer, kinder, gentler, warmer, quieter, humbler, so that they can become firmer, stronger, and wiser.'"

Members of our conference raised their eyes, leaned forward, or began to write rapidly on their already well-filled paper pads.

Who was this man? Wasn't he a hardliner on basics throughout the conference, espousing the views of businessmen and industrialists, stressing the importance of reading, writing, and computation? (He was, in fact, James G. Cook, president of the Thomas Alva Edison Foundation.) Was it possible that through the alchemy of discussion of the past three days he—and most other participants—had moved to view the basics from new angles?

This assumption is the reporter's. But it is indisputable that the comment put a capstone on the detailed and factual discussions of our conference. It also reflected the truth that, in our search for what was basic in American education, we moved from one set of elements to another, just as the schools have moved and are moving from one set of offerings to others to serve the children more appropriately from generation to generation.

Above all, the Wingspread conference was concerned with

competence in reading, writing, and mathematics. On these the conference spent the bulk of its time and energy. But even in the first few hours it became clear that other competencies, other understandings—in short, other basics—required consideration. Survival or life-coping skills came up early as essentials for today's students. The arts of human relations were fervently espoused in nearly every session. The capacity for thinking and problem solving was supported as basic, as were self-esteem and positive self-image, as aids to learning.

One of the great educational documents of our time, *The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, still relevant even though issued in 1918, was often invoked.

What is great about this 60-year-old statement? The national commission that wrote it did not offer sure-fire remedies for American education and its students. It recognized that educating the individual is a complex process in which multiple goals must be met—goals requiring different types of subject matter. The basic skills, or command of "fundamental processes," as the venerated commission of the National Education Association called them, constitute only one goal, the second in the list. (Health is placed first. The others are worthy home membership, vocation, civic education, worthy use of leisure, and ethical character.) The document endures because it recognizes that the school must view the individual as a totality and be concerned with the total personality.

This view inspired many members of the Wingspread conference. One study group reported that the real basic in education is the child. We should make the learner, not the subject matter, the focus of our attention, they said.

Without veering from its main assignment, the Wingspread assemblage discerned that there are disintegrating basics and emerging basics; basics that served a static, simple society and spiraling basics needed for the dynamic life of the United States today and tomorrow.

For the most part, basics cannot be fixed; they are as changing as the maps of the world, as our kitchen appliances, as our banking and wage-earning activities. Furthermore, what is basic to the college-bound student may not be so for the youth who will seek a job after graduation from high school, enter the military service, or get married. And individuals must not be grounded on the lowest rung

of skills. There must be several levels of basics, so that each student can aspire to the next one and the next one after that—as he* will.

Truth, beauty, and love, and Dag Hammarskjold's ideas of humaneness, were not mentioned until the closing session. Possibly, though, these concepts were in the minds of the participants throughout the conference; and it is also possible that these ideas may be the ultimate goals of the friends and foes of the back-to-basics movement—a movement we shall examine next.

*For clarity and economy, we use the masculine form of pronouns throughout this fastback when no specific gender is implied. While we recognize the trend away from this practice, we see no graceful alternative. We hope the reader will impute no sexist motives; certainly no sexism is intended. —*The Editors*

The Movers and the Movement

When an adult is in discomfort, what children do, or don't do, seems to be especially annoying.

Early in the 1970s America had a big headache. It was just about that time that a public demand for quieter schools, more obedient students, and greater emphasis on reading, writing, and arithmetic became more intense than in previous years.

The nightmares of Vietnam and Watergate were troubling the nation, and almost at the same time Americans also began to feel the pinch of inflation and unemployment. The pain was further intensified by conditions in the decaying cities, by bribery and corruption in business and industry, by drugs, adult crime, and youth vandalism. The vital fluids of American life—fuel oil and gasoline—were threatened by rising prices, predicted shortages, and oil spills.

"Whenever there is a dislocation in American society, a reexamination of public education follows," said one of the calm, mature voices at Wingspread.

People in some sectors of American society, however, are not reexamining education objectively but are accusing it of utter failure. They propose a slogan remedy: "back to the basics."

Newspaper editorials demand that "the 3 Rs must come home again." Parents attending PTA and school board meetings charge that the schools are soft on reading, writing, and math instruction—and usually make the headlines. Taxpayers, citizens, voters, including those who know how to reach their state legislators, call for laws to bring a return to the basics. Employers as always are sharp in their accusations that those entering the labor market are weak in reading, writing, spelling, work habits, and attitudes. Black and other minority parents, confident that mastery of fundamental skills is a way out of poverty and the slums, join in these demands. College

entrance examination officials and college professors complain that the secondary schools are sending them students who read and write at low levels and are not prepared for higher education.

Are the accusations true? Is a new, strong movement needed? Or is this a reaction to painful conditions being experienced by the country—one of the periodic public eruptions against schools and educators so frequent in American history? Even if the latter, what can be its positive uses? What might be its dangers?

The men and women who came to Wingspread sought, among other things, to assess the characteristics of the movement. One obvious characteristic of its backers is their self-assurance. Obviously, some parents, politicians, ministers, school board members, and businessmen are not reexamining American education—a consummation devoutly to be wished—but are seeking to apply ready-made formulas to the elementary and secondary schools and make them prevail. "Back-to-basics proponents come with answers without having studied the questions," said one Wingspread participant.

Other participants, looking deeper, saw a movement born out of the frustration, bitterness, and bewilderment of adults trying to cope with the octopus of the educational establishment. They also conjectured that the nostalgia of adulthood, not the needs of children, often motivates the basics advocates. And many at Wingspread wondered aloud to what extent "back to basics" is a code phrase for "Let's cut the school budget" and "Let's have law and order in the schools," the latter a cover-up for "Let's have more obedient children," "Let's have quiet in the classroom," and "The kids move around too much and ask too many questions."

Finally, it was noted that back to basics, although emerging from the people, not professionals, is not a popular movement. Despite widespread publicity and the blow-up of instances of poor teaching, the vast majority of parents are not getting on the bandwagon. Two items are worth noting: 1) A lawsuit on behalf of a single "Peter Doe" against a board of education has been used to disparage the instruction in reading given to more than 40,000,000 youngsters by hundreds of thousands of teachers. 2) An informal survey, made under the aegis of the New York State School Boards Association, found that neither parents nor local school boards "are being stampeded into changes demanded by back-to-basics advocates."

There are, or could be, positive values in the basics push, Wingspread participants believed. If so, these would come from the programs and plans, the concepts and principles espoused by the more thoughtful in the movement. But, certainly, positive values would not emerge from demands for stationary desks, the paddle, and mindless memorization of outdated facts.

What are the major demands of the strict fundamentalists? They fall into three categories:

Content and subject matter: Under the fundamentalist plan, most of the elementary school day would be spent on reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, punctuation, and penmanship. Fundamentalists would be happier with geography, civics, and history than with social studies. They prefer grammar to language arts. Patriotism is high on their list—and they applaud the memorization of inspiring poems and participation in ceremonies honoring flag and country. Many would "reinstall God in schools" if only the U.S. Supreme Court did not stand in the way, and they are tireless in seeking to reinstitute prayer and Bible reading in the public classroom.

The secondary school day would be devoted to English, mathematics, history, civics, science (biology, chemistry, physics)—the traditional, "hard" disciplines the older generation knew in school. Diagramming sentences is still rated highly as an aid to writing; skills in fast computation and finding square roots are musts in mathematics.

Art, physical education, nutrition, and possibly other subjects that have edged their way into the elementary and secondary curriculum should stay only if they do not detract from the first-line offerings and take second-line position for time, funds, and teacher assignment.

Methodology: It is unusual for a grassroots educational movement to be concerned with the process and methods of teaching and learning. Yet here we have it. Reading is to be taught through phonics. Instruction in arithmetic and math is to emphasize computational exercises. Drill and recitation are to dominate teaching and learning. Stiff doses of homework are highly recommended. Frequent tests are to be the spurs to learning. Report cards are to bear grades—A, B, C, etc.—which are to serve as the crowning achievements of education. Promotion from grade to grade and graduation

from high school are to be permitted only after mastery of skills and knowledge has been demonstrated through proficiency tests.

Attitudes and behaviors: Of equal concern to the strict fundamentalists are 1) the relations between student and teacher and 2) the attitudes they regard as essential for children. Discipline is the desideratum—to be enforced by rules and punishment, including paddling (found legal by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1977). Dress codes for boys and girls are good in that they promote neatness and decorum—virtues to be nurtured. Quiet, order, promptness, and student obedience are other props of the basics classroom—all of these to be presided over by teacher authority.

To make sure that the basics get first attention, fundamentalists would bar time-consuming and, to them, fruitless classroom "rapping" between student and student and between student and teacher. They are suspicious of "methods of inquiry, investigation, and problem solving." To be kept out also are the plethora of high school electives and minicourses; and, of course, the "social services" provided by the schools—and these might include anything from sex and driver education through consumerism and guidance.

There were, indeed, "fundamentalists" at the Wingspread conference, but their views were not unreasoned or simplistic. When they spoke, others listened.

Some Kinds of Responses

When confronted with the demands and charges of the basics advocates, American educators tend to respond either with apathy or with contempt, by shrugging off the criticism or by dismissing it peremptorily. They may say, "We have never left the basics." Or they may offer a counter-slogan: "We're moving *forward* with the basics."

When the response is more substantive, it may take the form of installing some parts of the laundry list presented by the strict basics advocates: greater stress on phonics in the primary grades, a crash nine-week writing course for seniors, a traditional history course at the secondary level, a tightening of classroom control measures, or an increase in the number of patriotic assemblies.

Some school districts have decided to cut wider swaths in their elementary and secondary curricula—eliminating or cutting down on recently developed courses and subject matter—to gain more minutes in the day for reading, writing, computation, grammar, and civics.

Very few districts in the nation have decided to devote an entire school, or several schools, to traditional education. Probably no more than half a hundred districts have schools that offer the basics as desired by the more devout fundamentalists. Models often cited are to be found in:

- Philadelphia, where 17 schools (out of some 200) have taken on back-to-basics concepts and practices. An "informational leaflet for parents" describes these schools as providing an "Academics Plus" program that "builds within each child a sense of responsibility, confidence, pride in accomplishment, and a

positive self-image through proven academic achievement in a quiet and orderly setting. . . ." (Academics Plus is also a tagline used in Oakland, California.)

- Greensville County, Virginia, which has rejected social promotion, where every student is required to take a standardized test twice a year, and no student is graduated from high school until he has mastered the skills required by the board of education.
- Jefferson County (Louisville), Kentucky, where parents have petitioned the school system to devote an elementary and secondary school to traditional studies and are reportedly pleased with the results.
- Andover, Massachusetts (one school K-6); Pinellas County, Florida (one school K-5, 240 pupils); Charlotte, North Carolina (Myers Park School, K-6, 500 students); Dade County, Florida (seven elementary schools and plans for expansion); Houston, Texas (several elementary schools and one high school).

Pasadena's public school officials have made a near total response. About 12% of the students are enrolled in fundamental schools, "with their very structured back-to-basics approach," and 83% are in regular schools, which are "under considerable impact of the fundamental approach." Only the remaining 5% of students are separated from fundamentalism, since they are enrolled in unstructured, "alternative studies" classrooms.

The quoted phrases come from Ramon C. Cortines, Pasadena's superintendent of schools, who brought to Wingspread an inspired report of his school district's experience.

Black and Spanish-surnamed students dominate the district's enrollment, and more than half the students come from families who receive some form of welfare or have incomes of less than $8,000 a year. The pressure for basics came from the ethnic and low-income families, as well as from elected board of education officials characterized as "conservative." Enrollment in fundamental schools is by parent choice.

Pasadena's five fundamental schools are showcases of back-to-basics education. There is the emphasis on phonics, on correct grammatical usage, spelling, punctuation, and computational

mathematics—all learned by drill and constant reinforcement. Art and music are not neglected. But first attention is to mastery of skills that allow students later on to read with ease and enjoyment and to move on to increasingly complex math problems. Cortines spoke with conviction about teaching patriotism. He explained the methods by which Pasadena students are taught to appreciate their country. Touching on character formation, he said that fundamentalist schooling stresses responsibility, fairness, firmness, consistency. After-school detention is used to help students with problems; paddling and suspension are reserved for exceptional cases.

The fundamentalist approach, he said, has had a salutary effect on all aspects of Pasadena's school system, "and if I had to sum up in one word what made the difference, that word would be *monitoring*."

He explained that monitoring, from the board of education level, is carried on through competency and proficiency examinations, which give board members data on the progress of education. Principals and teachers can monitor progress in reading and mathematics by administering periodic criterion-referenced tests. The superintendent himself is constantly monitoring the entire school system—a task that brings Cortines to his office hours before school begins each day.

A frequent accusation of school critics is that the American high schools turn out graduates who do not have the competencies to function as job-seekers and job-holders, as efficient producers and wise consumers, as citizens, parents, or indeed as individuals who can survive in today's complex society.

At the bottom of these deficiencies, the critics maintain, is the incompetence of American students in reading, writing, and computing. Critics began to look to state legislatures for remedies. And at about the middle of the 1970s the pressures began in earnest.

"The pressure on the states was surprisingly strong," Chris Pipho of the Education Commission of the States told Wingspread conferees. "Constituents of all types—parents, voters, businessmen, senior citizens—began to lobby in state after state. They wanted legislators to enact laws requiring students to give evidence that they could read, write, and compute at a reasonable level before the diplomas were passed out. After Florida and California passed such laws, the movement caught on like a grass fire."

The latest tally (June, 1977) showed that 10 states had enacted legislation requiring minimal competency testing for high school graduation and grade-to-grade promotion. Rulings from 16 other state boards of education required similar actions.

A score of other states were holding legislative hearings or debating bills on this issue throughout 1977. It was inevitable that the idea would spread to the federal level. U.S. Representative Ronald M. Mottl (D-Ohio) introduced H.R. 6088 requiring state education agencies to establish basic standards of educational proficiency for high school graduation. Proficiency high school graduation plans would have to be established, according to the Mottl bill, before states could get funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

The language in state measures to test for minimal competency is often simple—a simplicity that obscures the difficulty of implementation. For example: "High school students must demonstrate an ability to read, write, and compute at the ninth-grade level." Some state laws are more specific but equally hard to implement. Virginia's statute and rulings expand requirements: Students must demonstrate functional literacy, including ability to read, write, speak, and "work with decimals and percentages to the extent that they can effectively participate in society as consumers." Virginia also requires a basic knowledge of the history and culture of the United States and of the concepts and processes of a democratic government and free enterprise economic system. They must also have a job entry skill. Assessment is left to the whims and consciences of test makers.

Note that Virginia's law touches on what have been called the survival or life-coping skills—a set of basics that many observers place on the same level as the 3Rs. The argument is that while it is vital to acquire the skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, it is equally essential to know how to apply these skills in everyday life.

Here is the way Superintendent William M. Kendrick of Salem, Oregon, explains to parents the need for life-coping basics in the 1970s and 1980s:

> Our society, with its credit cards, installment purchasing, high-speed automobiles, and television, requires different individual skills than the society of the 1920s and 1930s. Today a student needs to be able to perform real-life tasks such as: read a newspaper, compute gas

mileage and interest rates, balance a checkbook, make change, know first-aid procedures, complete tax forms, understand credit, know the voting process, use safe working procedures, write letters for employment, and prepare job applications.

Under Oregon law Salem and other school districts in the state must put into effect school board policies and regulations requiring students to prove, through tests, that they have such competencies. Salem has developed 35 "competency performance indicators" that a student must meet (along with credit and attendance requirements) before he can be graduated from high school.

The Wingspread conference heard predictions that more states will enact laws or institute rulings for minimal competency testing and that by 1984 all states will probably have them. Some state authorities are not having an easy time drafting or getting approval for such measures—as witness the long public discussion and slow legislative action in Connecticut and Iowa. Still, Wingspread participants noted that it is easier to mandate minimal competency measures than to implement them, easier to require proficiency tests than to construct and use them as tools for the education of America's youth. For one thing, state agencies leave it to local boards of education to set the standards for proficiency. And what shall these standards be?

"The student must be able to read a newspaper"—yes; but which newspaper and which part of the newspaper? "Must be able to demonstrate safe working practices"—fine; but at what level of safety should this be? Wingspread participants also asked about the minimal competency movement: Who should decide what competencies ought to be taught? Who should establish performance standards? Can parents and educators agree on a set of minimal competencies? Will the minimum become the maximum? Will the predominant competencies required by states become competencies required by the federal government? Would that lead to a national curriculum? Will the trend eventually produce a "mediocracy," in which students will say, "If that is all I need to know to get a diploma, why try harder? Why try for anything else?"

Toward the Fundamentals in Subject Matter

The effort to define what is basic in American education inevitably leads to an examination of the durable and lasting aspects of our schools' offerings and services. These include a curriculum, methods, approaches, and educational concepts that have evolved over more than 200 years. As historian Henry Steele Commager has eloquently put it, our schools have kept us free. They have also helped produce a nation of unsurpassed technology and military strength, but one that can also legitimately claim high cultural attainment and historically unprecedented aspirations for human rights.

It is this curriculum, and its functions, that are being questioned. Some few individuals would so change and disassemble the curriculum as to make it more suitable for a past age than for today and the future. The more moderate voices, however, ask only that the nonessentials be discarded and the wasteful eliminated. They would conserve and enlarge curriculum fundamentals.

Separating the essential from the nonessential was the task before the Wingspread conference as it set about reexamining the core content of American schools and how it is being taught.

Reading

Bring up the subject of reading and you bring up more than a controversial topic. It is an emotional issue, a hot potato, a political football, a bone of contention, a rallying-cry, an obsession. For some it is the motherhood and apple pie of American school life.

It is the first R. It is the first concern of some parents long before the child enters school. It has been the center of national rage and a federal crusade. It has been the focus of research for a century. In recent decades millions of dollars have been poured into investiga-

tions, although how much better we are informed about the mysteries of reading as a result is not easy to say.

But this is an incontrovertible fact: Reading has always been a major concern of school administrators and curriculum directors. Usually it is the first or second subject of instruction in the morning in all early grades. Hundreds of thousands of teachers have labored to produce good readers. Many teachers resent the charge that they have not taught or are not now teaching the reading skills. "We've never given up and never slackened our efforts in reading instruction," is the soft reply many grade school teachers offer when they are accused of forsaking the basics of reading or are enjoined to intensify their instruction. For decades, reading has engaged the attention of more leaders, has claimed more school time, and has received a larger share of the school dollar than any other subject in the curriculum.

The charges that the readers the schools produce are, in some cases, not good enough may come from *some* parents who will be satisfied only with the best for and from their children; *some* employers who always want better skills and higher productivity from employees; and *some* college instructors who wish to teach a selected clientele instead of the mass of students entering college in recent years. The public schools, under pressure to provide quantity education, have not always succeeded in providing quality.

Moreover, for some four or five decades—starting with the 1920s—reading instruction has been racked by partisanship within the profession. There were the persuasive, emotional educators who insisted that young children should immediately get at the meaning and understanding of words; these were opposed by forces, equally numerous and determined, who believed that children should first know their letters and the letter sounds—the key to decoding words—regardless of whether they knew their meaning.

How much this struggle damaged the reading ability of a generation of children is uncertain and may never be determined. It probably confused some teachers and kept them from applying a variety of techniques. This warfare within the profession—and the textbook industry was exacerbated by the slogan "Johnny can't read," which in turn inspired Rudolph Flesch's 1950s best seller, *Why Johnny Can't Read*.

Some Johnnies and Janes couldn't—and can't—read as well as

some adults expect them to, but the schools were and are not the only forces responsible. Societal factors play a role in the degree to which children can succeed in school and in any subject. Consider two related factors affecting reading: 1) The number of homes richly equipped with books, magazines, and newspapers, in which adults pursue reading as a major leisure time activity, has dropped sharply in the United States; 2) television dominates the living space and living time of the family.

Nevertheless, the reading performance of American children and youth is formidable. Youngsters in all the first six grades are doing better in reading than ever before in history, reading specialists at Wingspread reported. This success may result from a renewed emphasis on reading in many school districts, lengthening of school time devoted to reading, the resolution of the energy-sapping debates about "the best method" to teach reading ("there is no best . . ."), and improved instructional materials in reading. It may also be due to some of the efforts of Head Start, Follow Through, and, ironically, to television (*Sesame Street, The Electric Company*), that same medium which inhibits reading among early teen-agers.

Reading ability among junior high school students is not as highly developed as most educators would wish. Puberty combined with such societal factors as television may cause a drop in reading scores at this age at the present time. But the picture improves as the teen-agers progress through schools. Recent national assessment data show that 87% of the nation's 17-year-old students are functionally literate; that is, they are able to read material necessary to function in American society, material such as newspapers, instructions, and driver license tests. The percentage goes up as high as 91% in the nation's central region and down as low as 80% in the Southeast.

The results do not satisfy everyone. They imply that U.S. schools have to do better what they have been doing all along.

The Wingspread panel on reading proposed the following guidelines for school and home to direct activities that would assure a mastery of reading:

Decoding is the first skill to be taught to the beginning pupil. Decoding, or sounding out syllables and words, is useful throughout a student's lifetime. New words—for instance, names of new countries and new trouble spots—can be read only through decoding. Thus the panel on reading tilted toward the use of phonics and a

code approach in the initial teaching of reading to the kindergartner and first-grader.

Comprehension is a skill which must be developed almost at the same time as decoding. Even the youngest child must know and understand the message the printed page is conveying. Lingering too long over nonsense syllables and "blends" can be deadly to the child's interest in reading. Neither parent nor teacher can be satisfied for a moment that decoding means reading. Only as the child's eye and mind light up at the meaning of words and phrases is he on his way toward comprehension.

The rate of reading must be a concern for the pupil, teacher, and parents. Taking inordinate amounts of time to read a page is evidence that the pupil has not mastered the skill. Speed reading is probably not desirable for the elementary and secondary pupil, but a reasonable rate of speed (which may include scanning and skimming plus a slow, contemplative absorption of certain sentences) is the mark of a good reader.

Reading as a skill in studying is different from reading for leisure and enjoyment. Different subjects—history, science, math, for example—require application of different reading skills. These must and can be learned.

Ability to decode a printed word—the first and very rudimentary skill—only opens the door to the basics of reading. Behind that door lie the joy and profit of reading. The pupil can reach these only as the school and home lead toward higher standards of comprehension, enriched vocabularies, adequate reading speed, and, above all, toward an aspiration to read material that is progressively more useful and more interesting. To reach such standards the student must keep on reading, and to keep on reading he must love it.

This is where the home and family influence play a part. When parents surround their children with books and magazines, and when they themselves show enjoyment in reading, they set the stage and provide the models for reading by children.

The Wingspread panel stressed that every teacher, at every grade and in every subject, must provide practice and inculcate the reading habit. But the home must also do its part. As one participant said during an informal conversation: "When Johnny or Jane is weak in reading, some irate parents call the teacher and the principal. Turning off the TV set might be the better step."

Communication

Even the note to the milkman, once a frequent home exercise in written communication, has gone with the milkman. The pencil, pen, writing paper, and typewriter are being displaced—not totally but largely—by the telephone, the tape recorder, and the ubiquitous greeting card.

Writing, the second R and previously considered the attribute of an educated person, is today a weak and wobbly art. Invention and new modes of communication are largely responsible for this. The businessman, statesman, and factory worker wishing to send a message reach not for pencil and paper but for the telephone.

The school has reflected this decreased concern with and use of writing in the home, office, and workshop. Today's youngsters have trouble putting sentences together on paper. Repeated national assessments of student achievement show that only the 9-year-olds are holding their own or showing improvement in writing, compared with children whose abilities were measured in 1970.

The writing performance of 13-year-olds exhibits awkwardness and a simplicity of expression bordering on the primitive. There is a notable decline in coherence in all teen-age writing; the writing of 17-year-olds nearing high school graduation shows recent deterioration. Speculation as to specific reasons for the decline often identifies the influence of TV and advertising lingo and the impact of the visual and aural communication (TV, again).

Looking for bright spots in a dark picture, educators noted that punctuation, capitalization, verb agreement, and spelling seemed to be well in hand—a useful reminder that familiarity with rules and mechanics of writing does not result in communication.

Educators and citizens—together—will have to make crucial judgments. Is writing a skill valued by today's society? Is the well-written, elegantly drafted letter to compete with the snappy telephone message? Are the schools to devote larger amounts of time and energy to a skill that does not rate highly in the adult world of work and social interaction?

The Wingspread panel on communication believed that educators should not set educational goals by themselves, that parents and the citizenry at large must have a voice in determining how the schools should spend their resources—and this point was especially true with regard to writing.

If writing is important to society, the schools can deliver the skills. Probably the best way to develop them is to require students to spend less time on rules and mechanics and more on writing itself. Here the educator comes to a fork in the road. Teachers can lead students in the direction of writing for the pleasure of expression or writing to communicate information on such topics as "How to Reduce Litter in the Streets." Is one direction better than the other?

Members of the communication panel expressed the belief that students who write for pleasure and self-satisfaction learn to write with vigor and often beauty. Equally important, they write more and more willingly. Students required to submit samples of "transactional" or "here is how" writing to be judged by teachers for accuracy, detail, or procedure usually end up hating the whole business of filling a page with sentences. Probably both types of writing should be taught, but a first consideration is to help students feel comfortable with composing sentences and putting words in the right place. "A desire to write is a basic in communication," said the panel's chairman. "Parsing a sentence is not."

A rethinking of the communications skills may lead to reshuffling their basic elements. Speaking and listening skills must be given a place in the basics not only for their own utility but because they may also promote reading and writing. Communication is an activity that involves sending and receiving messages, using sounds, symbols, images, movements, written and spoken words, pauses, emphasis, pitch, and stress. How these forces interact we know but imperfectly. There is little evidence that memorizing rules, definitions, and parts of speech help the child communicate. Such memorizing may, in fact, block his will to do so. Actual experiences of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, guided by responsible teachers, provide the basics in communication.

Mathematics

Those few individuals who would return to early phases of the school curriculum might find it revealing to choose mathematics for their backward journey. Depending on how far back they wish to go, they might arrive at a time when the arithmetic class was dominated by such questions as, How many firkins in five and three-fourths bar-

rels? How many puncheons would a farmer need to transport 470 gallons of water from well to barn? What is the rule of three? Or they might encounter the time when mental arithmetic ("multiply 7,645 by 4,327") was a sign of high scholarship. Or those years when arithmetic books were crammed with problems involving paper hanging, ditch digging, railroad mileage, and the speed of horsedrawn carriages. And in almost any year of generations past the observer would find the student's time and mind occupied with meaningless, intricate, and time-consuming computation exercises an inexpensive hand calculator now performs in a split second.

"Don't be silly. Of course we don't want to go back to calculating firkins," back-to-basics advocates say. "We want to go back to. . . ." But in which decade, during which generation, was the mathematics curriculum so exemplary as to warrant a backward journey? Such a query gives point to the answering question used by many educators when asked to return to the basics: "Where is back?"

There was complete agreement at Wingspread that young children must be taught how to add, subtract, multiply, and divide, and this must be done by giving them the underlying principles of these processes insofar as young minds can comprehend them. Did the schools of a generation or two ago teach these fundamentals processes better than today's schools? Probably not. But that is not the point. If any school today does not give enough emphasis and enough time to these rudimentary mathematical processes, the error can be corrected—and must—through school board policy, administrative rules, and faculty action. However, total and sole emphasis on these rudiments of mathematics, or their more complex manifestations in the upper grades, does not serve the needs and interests of today's children and tomorrow's adults. The automatic cash registers, the hand calculators, and the computer are here to prove it. What is really basic in the mathematics curriculum of today, along with the fundamental computational skills, is the understanding needed to utilize and master these number machines.

During the opening sessions of the Wingspread conference, one mathematics educator offered the suggestion that a sound mathematics curriculum can be constructed out of *activities* that give the student a feel and sensitivity for quantity, magnitude, and size—largeness and smallness—as expressed in the language of mathematics. Such capacities are indispensable in these days when we deal

with micrometers and light years, with mills to calculate our real estate tax, and with billions to comprehend the size of governmental budgets. Further, Wingspread participants heard, a mathematics curriculum should include activities to develop a student's skill in making rough estimates, in noting comparisons and seeing relationships. "Per" is such a useful word, said one speaker, that it would be worth spending a considerable amount of school time to make sure that every student understands its implication.

All this does not downgrade the importance of skills of computation. Members of the Wingspread mathematics panel were close to the thinking of the nation's teachers and supervisors of math when they wholeheartedly included computation in the list of basic mathematical skills. They did not put it first on the list, nor last. It was there—in the middle—as an essential component of today's elementary and secondary school curriculum. The panel agreed that students should gain facility with addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of whole numbers and decimals. They should be able to compute with simple fractions and to recognize and deal with percents.

Computational skills, as the math panel saw it, represent a starting point for the better mathematics education today's students need. But the panel agreed: "It will do citizens no good to have the ability to compute if they do not know what computations to perform when they meet a problem. . . . The hand-held calculator emphasizes the need for understanding: One must know when to push what button. . . ."

Learning to solve problems is the principal reason for learning mathematics, the panel maintained—not textbook problems that require a simple computation, but problems inside and outside textbooks that require analyzing a situation, using common sense and logic, applying trial and error, deciding what facts are needed, arriving at tentative conclusions, and subjecting these conclusions to scrutiny. Such a process calls first for the mustering of reason.

Said the panel: In solving problems, a person needs an alertness to the reasonableness of results, ability to estimate and approximate, the concepts of a three-dimensional world (stemming from geometry), and skill in measuring distance, weight, time, and temperature. The development of these resources and capacities is the business of

classrooms trying to develop basic mathematical skills in children and youth.

The twenty-first century is almost here. It will be a century when verbal and written symbols will move over to make room for the visual image, a century in which our ability to foresee and shape future events will be crucial, and above all the day of the computer. Therefore it is a matter of survival to develop within the student a set of basic skills and knowledge that our parents could but faintly perceive: reading, interpreting, and communicating through tables, charts, and graphs; using mathematics to predict; above all, learning what the computer is and what it is not, what it can do and cannot do, and how to make it a servant instead of a master.

Science

When Herbert Spencer asked, a century ago, what knowledge is of most worth, he concluded that it was knowledge of science. In choosing science as *the* basic, he may have been right or wrong. He was definitely wrong, however, in his assumption that scientific knowledge was available in ready-made form and that its transmission from the pages of textbooks to the minds of students constituted the study of science. Spencer missed the point about the educative value of science—a search for answers. To a distressing extent, Spencer's error still permeates much of science instruction today.

Science panel members recognized that America's schools are still addicted, for the most part, to the flawed view that science is a collection of facts and descriptive detail to be memorized by the student. This notion has to be rejected if the essential value of science education is to be realized.

Like Spencer, many science educators today hold that science is *the* basic. Their reasons, brought up to date, stem from a conviction that the survival of mankind on this globe depends on answers that can be derived primarily from study of the sciences. Pollution, overpopulation, food and energy shortages, the machine (civilian and military) threaten global disaster—a disaster that can be averted only if we make correct decisions about our present and future.

Such decisions, science educators agree, are best when based on information and predictions derived from a study of the world and theories about how it operates.

When the science panel began its deliberations at Wingspread,

most of its members held these views, or at least did not disagree with them. At the same time, they knew that other groups, in other rooms, also regarded their subjects and disciplines to be as basic as science for the education of the individual.

Very properly, the science panel did not seek first place for science in the curriculum—a commendable attitude not always shown by other panels for *their* subject matter.

The panel stressed the importance of science in the development of a thinking individual, saying that although science is only one of many ways to describe and learn about our worlds—both seen and unseen—its usefulness in developing *thinking* individuals can hardly be surpassed. Perhaps the study of science requires the absorption of encyclopedic facts, but it also requires and develops an inquisitive mind interacting with the world around it. The science student searches for knowledge, yes—but he also sets out on a quest for predictions as to what can and might happen if the forces and building blocks of the universe were to be manipulated.

In the schools, science activity might well parallel the activity of the scientists, the panel agreed. The scientific enterprise is ongoing, endless, and open-ended. Its starting point is a questioning attitude. Questions and more questions, and the zeal and ability to ask them, are characteristics of the scientific workshop, and should be the characteristics of the science classroom. And along with the questioning come the gathering of evidence—its exploration, observation, weighing, measuring, calculation, and estimation. The process of science then turns to the elimination of unneeded evidence and the selection of what seems promising, for the scientist always has an idea (sometimes clear, sometimes hazy) of what he wants or should like to see happen. In other words, he espouses a theory—and the payoff of scientific activity lies in the continual testing of theory against evidence.

Even this brief description suggests the activism of science. "Science deals mainly with verbs," said the panel. Its chairman went on to explain, "Science is concerned with behaviors, with actions and reactions—terms applying both to the scientific worker and student, as well as to the matter and nonmatter with which the individuals work." What is basic in science teaching and learning cannot be placed between the covers of a book or on audiovisual equipment.

The basics are the skills, attitudes, and understandings that can be developed in students.

Depending upon the student's age, said the panel, basic science education should:

1. Develop within a student abilities to inquire, to ask many questions about what they see, hear, and read.

2. Help students to choose questions for which they plan to gather data and from which they hope to draw conclusions.

3. Provide students with the skills necessary to get sufficiently quantitative data to answer their initial questions.

4. Help students understand the major "laws of nature" and their theoretical applications.

5. Lead students to an understanding that scientific theory is man-made and is subject to change, and that the "facts" about the universe, as we think we know them, may have to be revised.

6. Help students develop sensitivity to the benefits and dangers of the applications of science, applications that can bring benefits or disaster.

The panel further proposed that good science instruction should help students gain a feeling of confidence and competence, and the attitude that at least some problems, if not all, are capable of solution.

As to "fringe benefits," science in the schools should develop within students a willingness to extend their personal experience by wide reading and contacts with people and nature, and a willingness to communicate their interest in the world around them by writing, talking, and listening.

Finally, it was the panel's position that science education should expose students to possibilities of a lifetime scientific pursuit—whether as a professional career or as an interest for adult life.

Toward the Fundamentals in Student Development

The Wingspread panel assigned to consider "other basics" did not feel it was given the remnants of the curriculum. On the contrary, here was a set of basics that included the most valued goals of society, the great ideas of Greco-Roman civilization, the moral teachings of the Judeo-Christian culture, and the most prestigious entries in the great philosophical treatises and practical manuals on education.

"We're sorry we had only a few hours to do what the Cardinal Principles commission of 1918 took weeks and months to do. But we may have reached about the same results," said the panel chairman. He then presented a set of basics agreed upon as indispensable by his panel:

Health: A sound mind in a sound body was an ancient goal in the education of youth. Who today would dispute the wisdom that health—physical, mental, and emotional—is a basic in education? Health instruction and the inculcation of health habits have been traditional in American schools. In recent decades schools have added safety, nutrition education, and physical fitness. A sick child cannot learn, nor can a hungry one or an angry one. All aspects of body, mind, and emotion are basic to effective learning.

The health education and physical fitness curricula face new challenges year after year. We have to cope with the sedentary habits of children plugged into television; the menace of drugs, cigarettes, and alcoholism; and the onslaught of new chemicals in our food and drink. Health instruction is all but undermined by fast foods, poor eating habits caused by either poverty or affluence, the erosion of open spaces, and the poisoning of our air, water, and land by the waste and wastefulness of technology.

Health educators carry on a fundamental phase of schooling.

When the people take to examining the range of the curriculum and establish priorities, health education may well come out near the top, or at the top, as was the case in 1918 when a national commission set forth the Seven Cardinal Principles of Education.

Social and civic responsibility: They used to call it "civic education," and its ingredients consisted mainly of descriptions of government and its functions. Later they called it "social studies," and under this label were grouped government, geography, history, and some economics—providing a body of fact to be memorized by the student.

History, geography, civics, and such latter-day subjects as problems of democracy are useful resources for American children and youth. The distressing fact is that memorization of dates, definitions, and textbook descriptions of how our society functions contributes little to becoming a citizen with social and civic responsibility.

The basics for today's citizenship education are:

1. A familiarity with the real and the actual; knowing how the political and governmental machinery works on local, state, and national and international levels.

2. Direct contact and, if possible, involvement with power structures and social forces that affect our daily lives. Whether it's in the post office, the national credit bureaus, or the local board of aldermen, students should get as close as possible to the operations of agencies affecting their lives, in order to understand the inner workings of such agencies.

3. The ability and the will to do something about the problems that affect our lives, families, neighborhoods, and larger communities.

A reading-listening-talking course in problems of democracy may do some good. But experiences that involve researching, decision making, and participating in both school and out-of-school actions in citizenship will bring more lasting results for social and civic responsibility.

Economic capability: A job is a prime ingredient in our lives; preparation for a job has long been regarded as a major task of education in the United States. Through the years, Congress and the federal government have made vocational education their darling. The land-grant colleges were set up (1862) primarily to train farmers and mechanics; the Smith-Hughes (1918) and subsequent federal voca-

tional acts have given our high schools modest resources to prepare a small percentage of our youth for the world of work. The current much-publicized "career education" emphasis of the U.S. Office of Education manifests a continued interest in preparing youngsters for work. With federal aid, both elementary and secondary schools have started or expanded programs seeking to equip youngsters with skills, habits, and attitudes useful in the factory, shop, store, and other places of work.

But a worker trained for a job in 1977 may find both his job and the machines on which he was trained becoming obsolete within a few years. Industries are born and die; jobs change, come and go; the specifications for trades and craftsmanship are continually being revised; and the tools and machines needed to prepare a youngster for sophisticated types of occupations are not available to the schools.

While career education is a basic for our schools, how to conduct it is a complicated question. How much of the responsibility for career education can and should the schools assume? Should most vocational education be acquired in industry and business outside the school? Are guidance and vocational counseling the real business of the schools when it comes to career education? Is the best vocational education a general education?

These are questions at the heart of vocational education, and it is best not to leave the decisions to educators alone. Parents, community leaders, legislators, and business, industry, and labor representatives—all must join in a search for answers. Although such joint deliberations are needed for every phase of the curriculum, they are crucial for vocational education.

Fostering creativity: When the Pilgrims loaded the *Mayflower* for its historic sailing, they carried on board axes and hayforks, muskets and fowling pieces—we know of no palette or paint brushes or a single fiddle. The separation of the arts from life was implanted on the new shores and Puritan stress kept the arts out of the schools for generations. When creative efforts finally managed to seep into the curriculum, they were kept apart from the "main" or academic subjects and frequently given the label of "frills."

The Wingspread participants do not believe that the arts are either superfluous or pretentious. The Wingspread panel included arts as one of the basics, saying they are not expendable even in the

face of budget stringencies. This view, incidentally, was even more strongly espoused at another conference—by a group of prominent businessmen, scientists, artists, and educators headed by David Rockefeller, Jr. The Rockefeller group report (May 22, 1977) declared that "the arts, properly taught, are basic to individual development, since they more than any other subject awaken all the senses—the learning pores." The Rockefeller group went on to say that the arts—music, painting, sculpture, drama, dance, poetry—are not only valuable for their own sake but frequently help improve reading scores and reduce school vandalism.

Use of leisure: By coincidence, two stories printed on the front page of a major metropolitan newspaper on May 29, 1977, told a good deal about our use of leisure. The first item, headed "To Many, Having Fun Means Taking a Risk," described how Americans find joy and excitement by foolhardy derring-do—climbing 100-story buildings and racing wildly in dinky little high-powered cars. The second, headed "Decline in Reading of Classics in Public Schools Causes Concern," reported that reading of European and American classics has declined in the public schools.

How one uses his free time is a personal matter, unless the leisure-time activity becomes a public nuisance or menace. But educators have believed from time immemorial that the school should help the individual learn to use his leisure for activities which recreate the body, mind, and spirit. Properly used, leisure can enlarge and enrich one's personality. The school has a duty to help the individual to enjoy music, art, literature, and drama and to develop avocational interests that call for more than neck-breaking jaunts.

Humaneness: Can the schools do it? Can they at least *help* in the great task of developing in individuals the art of being human? Some people despair of any real achievement by the schools, arguing that it is a task for the home, the church, and the community at large. Others, also despairing, add that the weakened home of today and the battered forces of religion are hardly equal to the challenge.

A Wingspread panel took the position that humaness is an indispensable goal for American education. Black members of the groups asked the rational question; all others supported them:

"What is the use of conducting a public school system if it does not teach students to treat the other fellow the way you like to be treated, even though he may differ in race, religion, national origin,

or social class? Of what value are the traditional three Rs if we don't teach students the basic R—respect for human rights, respect for individual conscience, respect for the qualities that make each person different from every other?"

Ever sympathetic to such views, the public schools over the years have undertaken the development of ethical character, moral and spiritual values, human relations, and intergroup education. The labels have differed, the results have been skimpy, and the need for human relations education remains as enormous as ever. Here is another area that calls for the help and action of the people. Do parents, taxpayers, and concerned citizens wish to support school programs concerned with development of humaneness to the same extent that they would support the development of academic and vocational capacities?

Positive self-concept: There is much that educators and psychologists do not know about the way learning takes place. But they seem to have one clue to the mysteries of education: That child learns best who has confidence in his ability and who has a sense of self-esteem.

Where these concepts are lacking, are damaged or destroyed, the child will learn poorly and very little. In short, a positive self-concept during the entire process of learning is basic to achievement, both inside and outside the school.

The Wingspread participants knew this; they did not know of any formal courses that teach a positive view of the individual. Such concepts grow and develop in schools where teachers and administrators respect youngsters and where each student is made to feel important for what he is. Such concepts are nurtured by sympathetic, supportive, and patient teachers, by wise counselors, and by guidance workers who help each child recognize his potential. Conversely, self-esteem is shattered in schools where racist and sexist prejudices operate overtly or covertly; where students are sorted, labeled, tracked, and assigned to preconceived roles that may do damage to their latent capacities.

High self-esteem is usually associated with the high aspirations essential to achievement. In education it is a basic ingredient too frequently overlooked.

Evolving Policy on the Basic in Education

The American schools, like all human institutions, suffer when they are the object of too much to-do and too little wisdom. They then become the target of groups that believe they can provide the single light and the truth.

The public schools have recently been affected by spurts of growth, bureaucracy, organization, systems, experts, apparatus, court decisions, laws, programs, and action for its own sake—with too little attention to basic ideas for their goals and governance.

Emergence of the back-to-basics movement is evidence that education is in a crisis of policy. Educational policy, fashioned by a partnership of professional and lay people, may set the schools on a proper course for at least the next decade or two.

Especially needed is educational policy to guide:

—a redefinition of goals for the schools, and

—a reexamination of the curriculum and the schools' programs for student social and personal development.

Many expect such policy to come from "above"—in high-level pronouncements from government, foundations, national associations, and the writers of books. But there are other sources of policy components.

A good place to start is the local school district—the place where the buck stops.

The search for and the pursuit of the basic can get off to a practical start around the school board table, in the superintendent's office, among faculty, parents, and other concerned citizens. Policy should guide their actions. Wise policy on goals, on curriculum, and on the school's role in preparing students for the future will go a long way in meeting both unjustified attacks and sincere criticism of the schools.

Sound school board policy does not come into being suddenly; it

does not originate with hastily drafted statements by the administration. A board of education under the gun—whether the gun is held by back-to-basics advocates or any other group—cannot fashion good policy. A calm climate—in and out of the board of education sphere—is essential for thinking and reasoned discussion. Only then can the board involve the public and listen carefully to all points of view. The tactical guidelines below may help local school officials assure such a climate when school critics become active.

—Don't overreact or underreact to criticism or demands of basics advocates. Don't panic and don't remain blasé.

—Avoid sloganeering. Although back-to-the-basics is itself a slogan (and a powerful one), don't respond with, "We're moving *forward* to the basics!" or "We never left the basics. . . ." Shouting matches do not promote the cause of education.

—Don't leave the task of responding to the basics advocates to public relations "spokespersons" or to specialists in subject matter, such as reading or math. It is a task for the board of education and the administration.

—Don't assume an adversary position. Basics advocates are parents, taxpayers, citizens, voters. They are not usually enemies of the schools.

—Avoid quick or partial responses to the demands for change in the schools. It is a disservice to the children to install, under pressure from special interest groups, such measures as drill, memorization, or subject matter that has been judged unsuitable for today's children by properly qualified agencies.

—Listen to the basics advocates with sympathy. Invite them to express their views at board meetings. They may have useful ideas and practical suggestions. Include them in the policy development process.

In rethinking policy on goals and programs, local educators and the community should search for the middle ground between 1) those who insist that the schools must reduce the variety, vagueness, and grandiosity of their aspirations and 2) those who hold the position that the schools are established for more than training in the three Rs because the fundamental skills merely lay the foundation for realizing other sets of basics, ranging from health through positive self-concept.

The fundamentalists may be right in saying that the schools have taken on too many goals, have promised too much, have raised the hopes of people too high. Too many goals mean too many programs, of which only a few can be properly implemented in the relatively brief hours that children spend in school. Wingspread participants heard that between 1964 and 1977 the number of high school courses and offerings has increased from 1,000 to 2,000. Many worthy areas of study were added—from courses on drug abuse to environmental education. This was in line with the trend calling upon the classroom to do something about each of society's ills. It is a trend that should be subjected to review.

As local school officials develop policy, three articles of conviction may help establish unity among diverse elements of the public, as well as serve as starting points for effective programs of education. But it would not be enough for a board of education merely to incorporate the following articles into its policy manual. The board must lead community discussions and see that the people both know and join with their positions.

1. *The first business of the schools is to equip all children with the skills, tools, and attitudes that will lay the basis for learning now and in the future. This means giving highest priority to developing skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and solving numerical problems.*

Board policy can see to it that initial claims on the community's resources are made for the realization of these priorities. School dollars, school talent, school time, and whatever program innovations are required must be concentrated on these top-ranking goals. That's what the schools are for. No student should be by-passed or left out of the schools' efforts to teach the fundamental skills. Board policy must assure that schooling for basic literacy will reach all students, in all neighborhoods, and from all homes.

"Training for literacy is the down payment, the earnest money the schools must lay out to get the community's support for the other, and equally important, goals and programs," said one Wingspread participant.

2. *Children need more than literacy. The schools need to give them opportunity to develop their capacities for thinking, working, creating, and gaining satisfaction out of life, each in his or her own way.*

Here is where board policy becomes more concerned with the individual than with subject matter. The child becomes the center and the focus of the educational resources of the district. And whether the child is average, gifted, or handicapped, board policy underwrites the community's intention to serve the child. Such policy does not look backward; it looks at the child and his future.

3. *The schools cannot take on the burden of solving all of society's problems; they cannot spend their resources on challenges that more properly belong to the home, family, workplace, the church or synagogue, government, and other agencies and institutions. But the schools can and will encourage community participation in the education of the young.*

Board policy should tell the community about the school's limitations as well as its capacities; and through its policies the board can discourage attitudes among faculty and administration that result in the addition of educational programs too ambitious for the school district alone to assume.

Some local school boards are reluctant policy makers, especially when it comes to goals and curriculum. State officials are not so reluctant. During this decade state agencies have leaped forward as policy makers, establishing minimum competency standards and proficiency testing for promotion and high school graduation.

The speed with which state legislatures and state departments have mandated measures for the public schools was a concern of Wingspread participants, prompting questions and eliciting cautions. Here's a sample:

- States should avoid a bandwagon approach to minimum competency laws and mandates. There are no ready-made models for minimum competency legislation. There are, however, such complex questions as, Who is to determine what the minimum skills are to be? Will the minimum skills demanded by law be the same ones a fast-changing society will require or will value for a reasonable length of time?
- The difficulties imposed on local school boards by minimum competency legislation should not be underestimated. Hence state authorities should work in close cooperation with local school officials when considering such laws or rulings. The

views of the visible and audible lobbying groups should be balanced with the views of the silent majority, which may, in in the main, seriously question the minimum competency movement.

- Statewide policy should recognize that minimum achievement goals will not satisfy the aspirations of most Americans. Policies should provide for means to encourage schools to go beyond the minimums.
- Statewide policy should recognize that some students will fall short of minimum competency. Local schools will need guidelines from the states on what to do about these students.
- State education policy makers should be aware that competency-bound education, with its reliance on tests, could trivialize the curriculum. Tests are useful instruments; they can also be damaging. State laws and rulings should incorporate restraints and standards in testing for competency.
- Remedial courses in basics may be a necessary adjunct of minimum competency provisions. But there is a risk that the schools will devote too many of their resources to remediation. Legislatures should keep in mind that adequate state support for education reduces the need for remedial courses.
- Social promotion has weaknesses. Still, it is deeply ingrained in the American system of education. Changes in promoting students from grade to grade should be made slowly and always with sensitivity to local practices and parental wishes.
- The high school is one of the most respected of educational institutions, and standards for graduation have developed over many generations. People from all walks of life should have a say under what conditions a diploma is to be granted or denied to an American youth. State laws and rulings should guarantee the people's right to set standards for high school graduation.

Policy discussions on the basics in education invariably come to the fact that for a number of years the scores of students taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) for admission to college have declined. On the record, this decline is obvious and real. It started in 1967 and has continued until 1976, the last year for which data are available. The scores show that both males and females have been doing less well, year by year, in tests measuring verbal and mathe-

matical achievement. The news media have given this wide publicity. Critics of the schools cite the downward slide as proof that much is seriously wrong with American education, that there is a decline in learning, and that there must be a return to basics.

The Wingspread conference spent many hours on this topic. Specialists from the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) and testing agencies brought many facts and led the conference in an exploration of the reasons for the trend. No final reply was available at the time of the conference, because the question was under study by a national panel appointed by the CEEB and a report was to become available late in 1977. Possibly, no completely satisfactory explanation will ever be found for the downward slide in SAT scores. Theories abound, and they are usually stated as questions: Have the SAT tests changed? Have the students changed? Has teaching changed? Are fewer bright students taking the tests? Are more students with low scholastic competence taking the test? Or, as some educators suggest seriously, Is the decline in part determined by the major upheavals in society—war, the civil rights movement, and the youth revolt against the Establishment?

Test scores, like the role of tests themselves, can be overstressed. The Wingspread conference urged that professional and lay groups continue to study carefully not so much the trend in scores as the trend in real learning now going on in the schools and in institutions outside the schools. Learning, said one Wingspread panel, if defined by what society currently considers important, may not be adequately measured by SAT tests.

Scholastic aptitude test scores for college-bound students may, at times, give a fair indication of what the schools are doing, but they do not necessarily indicate what the schools *should* be doing. That is a job for the makers of educational policy. And educational policy is too important to be left to test makers and test givers. It is also too important to be left solely to professionals and experts, or solely to lawmakers and political leaders, or to pleaders of special interests and promoters of special causes.

No single group, with a single point of view or a single clue, can provide the answers to the problems faced in American education today.

No single solution, no single remedy, will work.

The Wingspread participants stressed that the problem of getting

at the basics in education belongs as much to the public as to the schools, as much to the local board of education as to the states and federal government, and as much to the classroom practitioner as to the academic and professional association. The Wingspread conference confirmed the importance of the problem and called for action on many fronts.

Appendix A
List of Participants

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